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Life at Work

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The Office Tattletale

A Waste of Everyone's Time

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You noticed it one day coming into the office: The receptionist was on a personal call. The next day, you watched for it. And before you knew it, you were so worked up that she spent her time talking to friends, you wanted to tell your boss.

We revert to grade school in many ways in the workplace. The tattletale impulse is just one of those ways we digress and turn something minor into a major issue that probably has nothing to do with our own work.

"People get irritated about the most fascinating things," said Heather Bradley, founder of the Flourishing Company LLC, a workplace consulting firm. "If it's really in the way of someone getting a job done, a manager will find out."

Bradley's earlier days as a human resources manager were spent listening to one co-worker complain about another. Unless there was an ethical breach, she would mostly just think the tattler was wasting too much of his own time worrying about someone else. Once, Bradley's company introduced a no-smoking policy on company property, so smokers began to go outside to smoke. First, nonsmoking colleagues started grumbling. Soon, co-workers were "telling on" colleagues who left their desk for a smoke break. Bradley's thought was, how could a co-worker know the smoker had stopped working, or thinking about a work problem, during a 10-minute smoke break? Or that he might not stay a bit late to make sure the work was finished? The time-wasters, in fact, might be the people who were so worked up about the smoker taking a break.

"If a person is committed to getting a job done, they manage their time," Bradley said. "If someone's tracking when someone is gone, they're doing what with their [own] time?"

Sure, there are times when one person should blow the whistle on another (Enron being a prominent example). Recently, though, there have been a couple of incidents in which tattling about personal, not financial, matters caused upheaval.

New York Times reporter Susan Sachs was accused by management, according to anonymous sources in press reports, of sending correspondence to the wives of two colleagues telling them their husbands were having affairs. She was subsequently fired. She has denied writing the messages, and the Times will not discuss its reason for firing her.

In March, Boeing Co. forced chief executive Harry C. Stonecipher to resign after the company's non-executive chairman received an anonymous tip that Stonecipher was having an affair with a subordinate. In that case, the company said it was less about the affair and more about poor judgment.

"What the Stonecipher case does is help companies view 'company business' perhaps more broadly and policy violations more broadly," said Jeffrey M. Kaplan, an attorney and member of the Law and Business Ethics Advisory Board at Midi Corp., which develops compliance and ethics training programs. "If you do anything work-related, that is now seen as fair game. That's because corporate reputations are seen as more important recently."

But there is a right way and a wrong way to "inform," if one must.

In good, strong workplaces, tattling doesn't really happen. Successful teams of workers push each other to work hard and not goof around. Those co-workers have high expectations for one another.

"In great teams in the workplace, the co-worker goes to the person and talks *with* the person first," said Curt Coffman, global practice leader at the Gallup Organization. "One of my fundamental beliefs is that you have to stop talking about the person and take the talk- with -people approach."

More often than not, someone who wants to spread the word that a co-worker sneaks out for a two-hour lunch every other Wednesday is only going to show a boss a personal conflict with the co-worker and an interest in getting ahead. What such workers are actually doing is wasting company time and breaking down morale.

"It's not really for betterment of an organization, but really because their feelings are hurt, they feel slighted, or have some need to hurt somebody else," said Kerry J. Sulkowicz, founder of the Boswell Group LLC, a consulting firm that specializes in the psychology of business.

The person may be telling a boss about an issue "out of deep-seated feeling of unfairness," Sulkowicz said. "It's like telling parents, 'You have to control this other person's behavior because it makes me feel bad.' "

And often, it's easy for a manager to see why a co-worker is spreading the word about another's misdeeds.

What that tattling tells a boss is, "I'm not a good co-worker or team player," Coffman said. "It's all about me."